

An Examination of the
Historical and Intellectual Background
of Robert Browning's "An Epistle Containing
the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish,
the Arab Physician"

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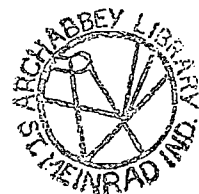


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INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century bore the burden of its thirty-seventh year. England was long a part-and-parcel of this yolk and, thus, was not without its own previous prolific history. English, a derivative from the Indo-European family of languages, obtained its heritage by virtue of this womb. Kings from the families of Tudor and Plantagenet shaped centuries of its time during their monarchical reigns. The Protectorate, the Restoration, and the Hanoverians were not silent stirrings on the land. It controlled America until hostility proved too much for the keeping; yet it had other imperialistic holdings such as in India. And it was native ground to many great poets like John Milton and William Wordsworth, a playwright by the name of William Shakespeare, along with many other prominent figures.

Nevertheless, England, like the United States in the months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, was a sleeping giant. Not that it was an isolationist trying to resist change; England needed that something, someone to advance and foster what was already blowing in the wind. Many previous decades showed the island's agricultural status slipping.¹ That break came not really with the passage of the Reform Bill, allowing suffrage rights to many in the middle class, or the revamping of the electorate system which severed monopolies. These were

important and needed legislations.² Instead, the real big boost came afterwards, in 1837, from the country's new queen, Victoria. A bulwark of creative energy, she gave exuberant impetus to industry and commerce, officially igniting the Industrial Revolution, making Great Britain a first-class world power and London the mainstream of the world.³

The early time, though, was not all that glorifying. Industrialization continued in the name of progress but it took the toll that experimentation required. The country saw financial boom due to their being the primary developers but segmented across its bubbling landscape were the loss of lives and rampant depression. Matthew Arnold wrote:

For what wears out the life of mortal men?
'Tis that from change to change their being rolls?
'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,⁴
Exhaust the energy of strongest souls.

This period did pass, however, noted Victorian critic George Ford. To supplement his observation, he quoted historian David Thomson, who pictured this time as one that saw Victorians bathing in relative "greatness, stability, and peace and the whole world, marveling, envied them for it."⁵ But the latter scholar did not fail to include the rejoinder that the continuing saga was still that of "the daring experiment of fitting industrial man into a democractic society."⁶ So from the '50's to the '70's prosperity for the majority seemed to be the vogue, though it was undeniably far from a utopian state.

Greater intellectualism, one with creative energy, was one of Victoria's keys. It was good and yet bad as it harbored one

of the leading issues of this time. It revolved around the field of religion as it countered with science and its expansionism. And in the midst of this controversy was the learned Robert Browning, another of Britain's best poets.

Browning couldn't turn his face from this challenge. He latched on to the idea of making a passionate response to the world. As a true poet he would be able to recline with nature while undergoing a process of cultivating culture. Philosopher John Stuart Mill commented on these focal elements: "The province of nature is fitness of sense, the rendering of states of enjoyment or suffering; that of culture is systematic reasoning and the shaping of sensuous imagery into spiritual meaning."⁷ Browning, in "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," took such a voyage of reflection. It demanded his ironic awareness of the full meaning of a human situation and a conscientious attempt to deal with the issues of the age.⁸ He was willing to cripple a god so as to revolutionize a monarchist. In other words, he attempted to abdicate science so as to humble science. As Browning himself emphasized: "They are not satires or attacks upon their subjects, they are not even harsh and unfeeling exposures of them. . . . They say or intend to say the best that can be said for the persons with whom they deal."⁹

It was in 1855, with Browning in his early forties, that he published Men and Women, a collection of fifty-one poems, many of them dramatic monologues, one of which was "Karshish." Let's journey into the poem which pricks the mind with its masked

nature, and its distant culture which serves also to join.

CHAPTER ONE: AN OVERVIEW

Browning's creative energy was caught up in story-telling. He created stories and re-created them. They, in turn, created and re-created him and others. These were the parables, "the dark intervals" (as referred to by contemporary Bible scholar John Crossan) in personal histories holding mysteries untold yet known if only wished to be perceived.¹⁰ Poems were stories of revelations wrapped neatly disguised, open to the man of wisdom. Wisdom, while being of the intellect, was also of the senses. Poets possessed wisdom; and thus, by nature, all were poets if they wished to be.¹¹ Granting and assuring himself of this, he entered into an epistle, comprised of a revelation, a story. It was profusely intense, profusely dramatic -- but nevertheless powerfully secure, powerfully inherent with wisdom. He found satisfaction in it in that it lured one back to the first century yet strapped one to his own nineteenth century rocking chair.

It was not, though, one of his first poems or something conditioned from his theatrical dramas. His premier achievement, "Pauline," ended in disaster with no copies sold.¹² Written at the age of twenty, it tended to be autobiographical. The critics jabbed at it, but John Stuart Mill landed the knockout punch in his synopsis of it as a ghastly naked self-appraisal. He would never portray himself so "au naturel" again.¹³ Bent

but not broken he churned out two years later "Parcelsus" which gained him his first iota of positive recognition.¹⁴ He then turned to drama where he lulled for several years in moderate success and notariety. The major problem, though, was that stage writing inhibited a self-expressionism for which he was yearning.¹⁵ He released the poem "Sordello." It proved to be a frightening re-entry as the public found it to be too much, too befuddling in their attempt to comprehend.¹⁶

He took to more serious study of a form, the dramatic monologue, which would appropriately convey his state of being. The form, though not completely original, was refined by him.¹⁷ He believed this form supplied him with a command of the highest style of verse artistry due to the degree of its challenge. It was regimented in the sense that it was a continuous battalion of commentary by one speaker, commonly self-aggrandizing, self-emptying, which were directed in a distinctive manner to a certain individual or group of individuals. Void in these scripts were the casts as such, the theatrical settings, the pauses, the choral explanations. These were his challenges but he persisted to make these guidelines work for him so that by the end one could be enraptured by the mysteries of the dark intervals into which he bewitchingly found himself.¹⁸

He mastered by issuance of a fantastic imagination, a prolific vocabulary, and a stout and savory syntatic style. A prime idea for him was to make words "effective," to make them breathe as if they were living matter.¹⁹ He often jumped from one idea to another,²⁰ making the reading all the more challenging

and perplexing to the reader (which made most critics think of him as mad) but with the thought of making one think and thereby, as J. Hillis Miller wrote, creating "his sense of what reality is like."²¹ Miller expounded on this idea:

Browning wants to make the movement, sound, and texture of his verse an imitation of the vital matter of its subject, whether that subject is animate or inanimate, molten lava, flower, bird, beast, fish, or man. He thinks of matter, in whatever form, as something dense, heavy, rough, and strong-flavored, and there is for him a basic similarity between all forms of life -- they are all strong solid substance inhabited by a vital energy. . . . It is by imitation of the roughness of a thing that one has the most chance to get inside it. . . . Thus, Browning's aim is to get to the inmost center of the other life, and working out from it, to express that life as it is lived, not as it appears. . . .²²

It also held some other definite qualities. One was that it permitted the flow of thoughts to continue clearly past one line, be it in blank verse or no.²³ Another was that it prevented him from being burnt as in his first poem. This method allowed him to clothe himself in the garb of another so as to guard his integrity, at least directly. This channel gave birth to another possible path he wished to explore. He desired to turn back the pages of ages and examine their content, believing it had "continuity with the present."²⁴

Predictably, it forecasted to "Karshish" and the other fifty poems of Men and Women reactions and reviews that were mixed. Many were once again turned off by his obscurity. Others were enlightened, including university students.²⁵ These were his true anchormen. These were the ones that allowed for his name to be written in the sands of time.²⁶ A group of these

were the ones who, though not negligent to his faults as a writer, were interested in what he had to offer. They were particularly interested in "Karshish." One group, writing in "The Dublin University Magazine," said it provoked "curious thoughts" because of its communication of "great subtlety of thought and metaphysical imagination."²⁷

But he knew the territory into which he was journeying; Browning was born with his face to the wind. His parents supported him economically, culturally, educationally, religiously. His father was an avid reader and, as our poet in "Pauline" noted, a collector of "wisest, ancient books."²⁸ These were at the disposal of the young Browning. He did not forsake his chance. Into his pool of thought went these vast stores of knowledge. He tried his hand at university life to the pleasure of his father but survived only several months.²⁹ He found society more genuinely in a tutoring father and home shelves full of literature. Assured of parental monetary support, he, in time, latched on the poetic pen.

His mother, as he wished his wife to be, was the dominant figure in the household. She commanded the daily affairs and introduced him to the religion of evangelical Christianity. Raised among dissenters, he found little satisfaction in it, considering it foolish in retrospect to what he knew from reading.³⁰ At the age of fourteen he acquired a copy of Shelley's Miscellaneous Poems. This acquisition was the straw that broke the camel's back. Biographer Betty Miller spoke to this view,

pointing out that Browning became an atheist for he "had recognized in the fearless spiritual independence of Shelley a principle of conduct whereby to measure, in the years to come, not only the sum of his own poetic achievement, but the very nature of human integrity itself."³¹ Browning had a weak belief in a God at this time. It fell under shellshock. However, under the inspiration of and deep devotion to his mother, together with a so-called revival of faith, he returned to church, to the dissenters, to Christianity.

But being associated with the sect can contrast with actually being of this sect. In his case it appears he was just a number. Enraptured as a Theist, he attended church in pseudo-inspiring and devotional contexts.³² He himself claimed he was not a Christian; critic Kingsbury Badger commented on this further, stressing the fact that Browning carried the view of a "metaphysical Power, Intelligence, and Love, rather than the theological Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit."³³ (This could be the basis on which the university students who read "Karshish" as evoking a metaphysicality claim justification.) It bound on him no creed, no recognition of sins thus no need of reconciliation. It, however, did not prevent him from believing in revelation, a Divine Presence, as Badger candidly surmised:

... Revelation meant the disclosure of God as Power and Love rather than oral or literary expression of Divine Will by an anthropomorphic God; and incarnation meant the revelation of this same Power and Love through any human personality, rather than the assumption of human form, at only one time in history, by a Divine Being.³⁴

There is no connection to any cross. Christianity seems on Browning's part to be what philosopher George Santayana described as "an adventure, not a discipline."³⁵ For Browning, being the type of poet he was, this would be logical. The reader and the author were to understand this as a learning experience. For the poet and the critic it meant the opening up of the intellect and senses to a message that is within. Both had the job of capturing the experience.

As poet, though, he was committed to be the honest spy. He must report to the public honestly and forthrightly -- giving them what they should hear.³⁶ He must first gather in the facts in full. One of his poems, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," sums it up neatly:

He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,
Scenting the world, looking it full in face. . . .
He glanced o'er books on stalls with half an eye,
And fly-leaf ballads on the vendor's string,
And broad-edge bold print posters by the wall.
He took such cognizance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a women, he took note.³⁷

Personally, then, Browning was well qualified to work with "Karshish" as he appeared to be housing a religion of liberalism. It meant he could be a bard, discerning what was taking place and giving himself access to write while still being a number. Browning was a manipulator but not a self-seeking one. He commanded his own ship and chose his own crew.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SURFACE STORY

"Karshish" stands squarely up to Browning's preconjectured style and personage. Victorian musicality and rhythm would not do. It would be the beast not the beauty.³⁸ One must swallow slowly the liqueur of irregularity, proposed Yale Professor William Phelps, understanding that "the strong, heady wine of his verse may become sweet in process of time."³⁹ He transports us back to the era of less than "Holy Roman" rule, to one of militant repressionism, a time of faith and doubt while, paradoxically, he carries the reader to his own subconsciousness, to his own fireplace to view his own world's spark of faith and ash of doubt.

We are first introduced to the disposition and plight of Karshish. He begins in prime Pauline epistolary form, showing himself as an apostle, "Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast,"⁴⁰ to Abib, the surgeon-general of his profession. He recognizes his lack of proficiency in the physical trade but makes undeniably clear his exuberance to fill in this abyss. In a gesture of reassurance that he is telling all, he notes how judiciously he has been in his correspondence up to this point. In addition, he recounts his latest sojourn, tallying for the record the hardship he is boldly facing in his thirst for knowledge. We discern this because his efforts were meant to share with Abib "whatever Jewry yields." Karshish proceeds

to engross his master with newly attained medical phenomena and attempts to disquiet himself, readdressing this letter a bit later.

But he is pressured. He has just finished curing a wandering Syrian, who was ailing from an eye impediment. The man was not able to repay monetarily; so he insisted that he pay Karshish's service by means of delivering the letter. Karshish submits but more so because of another incident. Jewry yielded.

The event is the resurrection of Lazarus, which he abashedly can't dismiss. The problem is that he fears his teacher, Abib, will be disgruntled for his macroscopic interest in such a "diurnal" affair. However, he continues with the hope Abib will permit his "better wit help all." He then proceeds (ll. 79-117) to review this case from a medical standpoint. He tries to convince himself and Abib in the end of this segment that there is a strange twist of fate which makes for mentioning this occurrence.

Think, could we penetrate by any drug
And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep!
Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?
This grown man eyes the world now like a child.
(ll. 113-117)

However, knowing what he knows, Karshish is not able to avert a psychological warfare, as witnessed in the next segment (ll. 118-234). Within it we see him trying to sidestep the issue by saying Lazarus is actually mentally deranged. "The man is witless," but "yet no fool." He claims Lazarus is in a "stupor," but Lazarus echoes in return that he, unlike

them, is wary of what is happening.

. . . -- he [Lazarus] regards thee [Karshish] as our
lord
Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
Looked at us (dost thou [Abib] mind [remember] ?)
when, being young,
We both would unadvisedly recite
Some charm's beginning, from that book of his
Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
Thou [Karshish] and the child have each a veil alike
Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
Over a mine of Greek fire, did ye know!
(ll. 167-177)

Karshish is shaken. Taken aback, he admits quickly (in the next line) that Lazarus is in touch with life, concisely affirming it in subsequent lines (213-215). Nevertheless, he regains his footing and takes aim once again; once again, he is felled by the kickback. The next several lines (235-242) portray a wearied mind trying to avoid the subject.

Karshish, though, must return. Portraying himself as one who covers all angles for science, for knowledge, he tells of Lazarus' sage, the Nazarene, whom he intended to see but who was dead. This leech was killed like theirs -- on account of his failure to exercise wizardry. Lazarus claims it was actually God. Karshish rebukes it as a lie (l. 260).

But he is caught up in its "strangeness." He avoids the topic (ll. 277-279) once again, apologizes, and explains his situation once again. The concluding segment (ll. 304-312) continues to find him perplexed over but now also seriously investigative of the possibility that "the All-Great" might be "the All-Loving, too."⁴¹

There was nothing grossly unfamiliar with harkening back to ages gone by. In fact, for Browning it was a dominant volition in his poetic career. Truth was to be the common denominator -- truth, in respect to the wisdom, the feeling of the day;⁴² imagination, though, could not and was not to be forsaken.

We are told of a Jew and several Arabs. There is no strange mixture of peoples here. During the early first century, to which he addresses himself, their co-existence was a common phenomenon. Both peoples were of Semitic origin and knew some culture and education. However, between them there existed a forked tradition.

The Jews, after fighting off polytheism, settled down under the wing of a "God of Israel." He was their God of compassion and love, who was to send down a messiah, His Son. This Son of God, this Nazarene, presupposed by them to be a political reactionary, made a lasting impression not by violence but by imitation of His Father's compassion and love. The revolutionized Jews were to spread this methodology.

The Lazarus story was common enough and dramatic enough for one who had read the Bible. He was considered a dear friend to the Nazarene leech; so it would have been likely he would have a knowledgeable disposition concerning the Jewish physician. Like any other first-century Jew confronted by a man who claimed to be the Son of God, Lazarus had his doubts but through association had come to believe in him as he expressed. Browning, a man of "wisest, ancient books," knew the Bible and knew the

history.⁴³

The Arabs were another story. In the first century, they were still a polytheistic people who worshipped gods like Athtar or Rahman the Merciful or a moon god and a sun goddess. However, the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, while not in disagreement with this view, did not completely acquiesce:

A primitive approach to Arab monotheism had already been suggested by gods like Rahman the Merciful. But the moon god who brought the cool of night in the desert was no more easy to displace than was a god of flocks like Yahu -- Yahweh or Jehovah -- who lived in a holy tent and received Bedouin sacrifices. Since all of these various gods took second place to the sense of tribal loyalty, the Arab had no particular horror of Christian and Jewish beliefs. For most Arabs the revolutionary message of Christ had little appeal. . . .⁴⁴

Browning, cunning as he was, bent but not broke the truth and gave Karshish and Abib a God, a God like his. In light of what we have said, this could be understandable. Many of his kindred Arabs were nomadic and/or herdsmen. Appeal to them would be distant. However, Karshish and Abib were sophisticated physicians, their plane of intellect more diverse, allowing for such a structure.⁴⁵

But this structure was also Karshish's door to skepticism and worry in contrast to Lazarus. He, Karshish, was caught up about the arrival of a Roman militant but Lazarus was not. Lazarus communicated "mercy" in terms of love, not the intellect. All was topsy-turvy as Karshish expressed:

Discourse to him of prodigious armament
Assembled to besiege his city now,
And of the passing of a mule with gourds.
'Tis is one! Then take it on the other side.

Speak of some trifling fact -- he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very littleness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed
He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
In ever the same stupor (note this point)
That we too see not with his opened eyes.
Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,
Preposterously, at cross purposes.⁴⁶

(11. 146-158)

Now, being a physician during that time was not a new trade. Hellenists, for example, had their healers. These men were magicians or of another position, possibly kings, yet all equally looked upon as endowed with supernatural grace, known as "men of god" who, upon death, journeyed to their congregated predecessors and remained honored as lords on earth by their followers of their sect. He was a person of great magnitude who overshadowed intellectually the common man and thus was granted the title of a "theios aner," or a "divine man."⁴⁷ This seems to be a testament to who exactly Karshish and Abib's "lord of the pyramid" was and what they were in line for.

However, at this time there was still another group of miracle workers -- the Jews. Something associated with them at a slightly later date was "the frequent occurrence of distinctly spectacular and bizarre features, so that, for example, a supposed raising from the dead is degraded to a malicious trick. . . or else as the results of occult knowledge and complicated magical practices."⁴⁸ This could stand as a testimonial to Karshish's reasoning behind his initial claim of Lazarus' only only having had an epileptic fit or to his thoughts on a dynamic balm. For was not the Nazarene leech a Jew?

Other shapings that keep it real are the reference to being in a pyramid, assimilating, therefore, the desert. Then the names, Abib and Karshish, though they were not of actual persons of this time, did connote something in that time which Browning undoubtedly was aware of as he was aware of many small but not trite articles.⁴⁹

Browning's scholarship, too, probably lead him to one Hunayn ibn Ishaq. This masterful court physician was considered by European authorities to be one of the eminent ninth-century healers. "Among his own writings is the earliest known work on eye diseases."⁵⁰ Did not Karshish's Syrian messenger incur such a problem and hence have it solved? Could not this be a reflection on the marvel of science?

But all this does have significance to the first century. There was repressionism in terms of government. Yet there were also other forces of intrusion -- one acute one being science. However, there were men who stood up for the Nazarene so that their spark of faith buried their ash of doubt. They strove to ignite others because they saw in that spark a truth. Browning portrayed it this way because he saw this as an important and growing wisdom of that day.

CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPLICIT STORY

Browning, though, commissioned himself to stir his age, not sit dormantly. Consequently, he took us, his readers, right into the rocking chair of his time. He recognized intellectualism and saw it as good, being himself well endowed with it. However, he also saw it as detrimental if it ignored the senses.⁵¹ Science, battling the religion of many, of his mother, was ignoring the senses. Therefore, it was the wisdom of the senses he stressed.

Specifically, the impending battle, controversy, was waging around the revolutionary Biblical Criticism or Germanism or Rationalism. Other European countries were stung by it first, but England soon enough found itself on the bandwagon. And it was truly feeling the bumps and bruises it was showering upon them.⁵²

The problem was this. Englishmen, like many others, were caught up in their own web of rationalism, including that of science. This ideology of science investigated the niches and crannies of many societal entities. The Bible, held by the Protestants of England (which were a considerable number) as being the most authoritative of anything they knew of, did not escape this scrutiny.⁵³

David F. Strauss in 1848 came out with his book, Life of Jesus Critically Examined, which "shocked the conscience of all

that was Christian in Europe,"⁵⁴ as Badger stated. Where were the people to turn if not to the Sacred Scriptures? Even the Tractarians who in the forties served to bolster the stigma of the Church of England against the Utilitarians who claimed religion served no purpose, who were inquisitive enough to learn from the Church Fathers, turned shallow in light of what Badger termed "inevitable developments," thus leaving many dangling who were seeking definite answers to the questions being raised by men like Strauss.⁵⁵ Disconcerting feelings were prevalent, like that of John Ruskin in 1851: "Those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses."⁵⁶

Strauss' examination came in the light of philology, comparative religion, and scientific historical investigation. Strauss' interpretation included nothing along the lines of love. He doted on the intellect and that which was wisdom of the intellect.⁵⁷ Those straitjacketed by authority were to be flustered as their creed and dogmas were being bombasted. For according to Strauss, to others of his line, "The Christ of the Gospels was a true product of the Hebrew mind, a product mythical rather than historical, formed by the preconceptions of Hebrew tradition and the impressions left by the character, actions, and fate of Jesus."⁵⁸

But Browning was clear of any such trouble. He was able to observe critically and without fear being as he was a liberalist.⁵⁹ Yet he knew of the conflict due to his participation as a number. And Browning, learned man, seeing what they needed,

fell sympathetic to the feelings of the people of the Church once again, giving ink to this controversy as he had several years before addressed in "Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day." Critic Douglas Bush took note of his past/present:

Browning could not take historical criticism as final, because human reason and knowledge are limited and fallible and because the real evidence is within the soul. He sees the divinity of Christ and the transforming power of human and divine love as fact of experience which mere biblical scholarship cannot overthrow. Thus, in spite of his antagonism to Strauss, Browning's attitude was not altogether different, though his positive faith was less intellectual and more fervent.⁶⁰

This faith of his, metaphysical as it may have been, did not allow him to be closed to others' possible revelations -- those of the Church. Browning made this clear:

I know the difficulty of believing. . . . I know all that may be said against it [the Christian scheme of salvation] on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. I grant that it may even be a fiction. But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend it, supply something which their humanity requires, and it is true for them.⁶¹

This is why Browning wrote "Karshish" with this underlying message to his time. It was because his metaphysicality, be it of Power, Intelligence, and Love, permitted him with intelligence to see another angle of the power of love. It granted him the ability to see exactly what humanity does require, be it "fact or fancy."⁶² The people were shaken because something their humanity required was being shaken. It was a challenge to have it persevere and a duty for him (on account of it being requisite) to see that it did.

Browning saw the people had the wisdom. They just needed to turn to being not only poets of the intellect but also of the senses, as he was willing to awaken them. He, in a sense, portrayed himself in Karshish, not to satire science but to humble it and possibly to bring himself to a greater humility, though not a radical change in belief as he knew his position, his preference.⁶³ In the main, though, it was to the Christians who needed that insurance of the senses, that wisdom of Lazarus to which Browning gave due heed. He was saying there was room for science but also definite room for those to whom Christ's cross and passion could alone supply such a revelation.

The past and the present do have continuity if one, though shaken, perceives with what he has command of, giving himself a spotlight on the revelation wrapped neatly disguised but open to the man of wisdom. Thus, the man of wisdom should be delighted to announce with Karshish, the scientist, "in spite of himself,"⁶⁴ as Badger interjected, that communication of "great subtlety of thought":

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So the All-Great, were the All-Loving, too --
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, O heart I made, a heart beats here!
'Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
'Thou hast no power nor conceive of mine,
'But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
'And thou must love me who have died for thee!
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.⁶⁵
(11. 304-312)

To Browning, it is strange if only wished to be.

CONCLUSION: THE POEM

There is something crucial that yet must be given -- the poem itself. While analysis and excerpts serve a purpose, the flavor of a poem is revealed best when in full context. This poem, like most others, is meant to be read aloud and read in one sitting. It becomes a piece of entertainment while yet creating and capturing and releasing as succinctly as possible something more than words. William H. Gass says aptly: "In terms of the ordinary meanings of meaning, poems, made of words, contain none."⁶⁶ Thus follows Robert Browning's "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician"⁶⁷:

Karshish, the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
The not-incurious in God's handiwork
(This man's flesh he hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapor from his mouth, man's soul)
--To Abib, all sagacious in our art,
Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast,
Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks
Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain, 10
Whereby the wily vapor fain would slip
Back and rejoin its source before the term,--
And aptest in contrivance (under God)
To baffle it by deftly stopping such:--
The vagrant Scholar to his Sage at home 15
Sends greeting (health and knowledge, fame with
peace)
Three samples of true snake-stone--rarer still,
One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,
(But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)
And writeth now the twenty-second time. 20

My journeyings were brought to Jericho:
Thus I resume. Who studious in our art
Shall count a little labor unrepaid?
I have shed sweat enough, left flesh and bone 25
On many a flinty furlong of this land.
Also, the country-side is all on fire
With rumors of a marching hitherward;
Some say Vespasian cometh, some, his son.
A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls: 30
I cried and threw my staff and he was gone.
Twice have the robbers stripped and beaten me,
And once a town declared me for a spy;
But at the end, I reach Jerusalem,
Since this poor covert where I pass the night, 35
This Bethany, lies scarce the distance thence
A man with plague-sores at the third degree
Runs till he drops down dead. Thou laughest here!
'Sooth, it elates me, thus reposed and safe,
To void the stuffing of my travel-scrip 40
And share with thee whatever Jewry yields.
A viscid cholera is observable
In tertians, I was nearly bold to say;
And falling-sickness hath a happier cure
Than our school wots of; there's a spider here 45
Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-gray back;
Take five and drop them. . . but who knows his mind,
The Syrian runagate I trust this to?
His service payeth me a sublimate 50
Blown up his nose to help the ailing eye.
Best wait: I reach Jerusalem at morn,
There set in order my experiences,
Gather what most deserves, and give thee all--
Or I might add, Judaea's gum-tragacanth 55
Scales off in purer flakes, shines clearer-grained,
Cracks 'twixt the pestle and the porphyry,
In fine exceeds our produce. Scalp-disease
Confounds me, crossing so with leprosy--
Thou hadst admired one sort I gained at Zoar-- 60
But zeal outruns discretion. Here I end.

Yet stay! my Syrian blinketh gratefully,
Protesteth his devotion is my price--
Suppose I write what harms not, though he steal?
I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush, 65
What set me off a-writing first of all.
An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!
For, be it this town's barrenness--or else
The Man had something in the look of him--
His case has struck me far more than 't is worth. 70
So, pardon if--(lest presently I lose,
In the great press of novelty at hand,

The care and pains this somehow stole from me)
I bid thee take the thing while fresh in mind,
Almost in sight--for, wilt thou have the truth? 75
The very man is gone from me but now,
Whose ailment is the subject of discourse.
Thus then, and let thy better wit help all!

'Tis but a case of mania--subinduced
By epilepsy, at the turning-point 80
Of trance prolonged unduly some three days
When, by the exhibition of some drug
Or spell, exorcisation, stroke of art
Unknown to me, and which 't were well to know,
The evil thing, out-breaking, all at once, 85
Left the man whole and sound of body indeed,--
But, flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide,
Making a clear house of it too suddenly,
The first conceit that entered might inscribe
Whatever it was minded on the wall 90
So plainly at that vantage, as it were,
(First come, first served) that nothing subsequent
Attaineth to erase those fancy-scrawls
The just-returned and new-established soul
Hath gotten now so thoroughly by heart 95
That henceforth she will read or these or none.
And first--the man's own firm conviction rests
That he was dead (in fact they buried him)
--That he was dead and then restored to life
By a Nazarene physician of his tribe: 100
--'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he did rise.
"Such cases are diurnal," thou wilt cry.
Not so this figment!--not, that such a fume,
Instead of giving way to time and health,
Should eat itself into the life of life, 105
As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones, and all!
For see, how he takes up the after-life.
The man--it is one Lazarus a Jew,
Sanguine, proportioned, fifty years of age,
The body's habit wholly laudable, 110
As much, indeed, beyond the common health
As he were made and put aside to show.
Think, could we penetrate by any drug
And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep! 115
Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?
This grown man eyes the world now like a child.
Some elders of his tribe, I should premise,
Led in their friend, obedient as a sheep,
To bear my inquisition. While they spoke, 120
Now sharply, now with sorrow,--told the case
He listened not except I spoke to him,
But folded his two hands and let them talk,
Watching the flies that buzzed: and yet no fool.

And that's a sample how his years must go. 125
Look if a beggar, in fixed middle-life,
Should find a treasure,--can he use the same
With straitened habits and tastes starved small.
And take at once to his impoverished brain
The sudden element that changes things, 130
That sets the undreamed-of rapture at his hand,
And puts the cheap old joy in the scorned dust?
Is he not such an one as moves to mirth--
Warily parsimonious, when no need,
Wasteful as drunkenness at undue times? 135
All prudent counsel as to what befits
The golden mean, is lost on such an one:
The man's fantastic will is the man's law.
So here--we call the treasure knowledge, say,
Increased beyond the fleshly faculty-- 140
Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:
The man is witless of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things,
Or whether it be little or be much. 145
Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
Assembled to besiege his city now,
And of the passing of a mule with gourds--
'Tis is one! Then take it on the other side,
Speak of some trifling fact,--he will gaze rapt 150
With stupor at its very littleness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed.
He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
In ever the same stupor (note this point) 155
That we too see not with his opened eyes.
Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,
Preposterously, at cross purposes.
Should his child sicken unto death,--why, look
For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness, 160
Or pretermission of the daily craft!
While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
At play or in the school or laid asleep,
Will startle him to an agony of fear,
Exasperation, just as like. Demand 165
The reason why--"'t is but a word," object--
"A gesture"--he regards thee as our lord
Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
We both would unadvisedly recite 170
Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
Thou and the child have each a veil alike
Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both 175
Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
Over a mine of Greek fire, did ye know!

He holds on firmly to some thread of life--
 (It is the life to lead perforcedly)
 Which runs across some vast distracting orb 180
 Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
 Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet--
 The spiritual life around the earthly life:
 The law of that is known to him as this,
 His heart and brain move there, his feet stay
 here. 185
 So is the man perplexed with impulses
 Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
 Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
 And not along, this black thread through the blaze--
 "It should be" balked by "here it cannot be." 190
 And oft the man's soul springs into his face
 As if he saw again and heard again
 His sage that bade him "Rise" and he did rise.
 Something, a word, a tick o' the blood within
 Admonishes: then back he sinks at once 195
 To ashes, who was very fire before,
 In sedulous recurrence to his trade
 Whereby he earneth him the daily bread;
 And studiously the humbler for that pride,
 Professedly the faultier that he knows 200
 God's secret, while he holds the thread of life.
 Indeed the especial marking of the man
 Is prone submission to the heavenly will--
 Seeing it, what it is, and why it is.
 'Sayeth, he will wait patient to the last 205
 For that same death which must restore his being
 To equilibrium, body loosening soul
 Divorced even now by premature full growth:
 He will live, nay, it pleaseth him to live
 So long as God please, and just how God please. 210
 He even seeketh not to please God more
 (Which meaneth, otherwise) than as God please.
 Hence, I perceive not he affects to preach
 The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be,
 Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do: 215
 How can he give his neighbor the real ground,
 His own conviction? Ardent as he is--
 Call his great truths all lies, why, still the cold
 "Be it as God please" reassureth him.
 I probed the sore as thy disciple should: 220
 "How, beast," said I, "this stolid carelessness
 Sufficeth thee, when Rome is on her march
 To stamp out like a little spark thy town,
 Thy tribe, thy crazy tale and thee at once?"
 He merely looked with his large eyes on me. 225
 The man is apathetic, you deduce?
 Contrariwise, he loves both old and young,
 Able and weak, affects the very brutes
 And birds--how say I? flowers of the field--

As a wise-workman recognizes tools 230
In a master's workshop, loving what they make.
Thus is the man as harmless as a lamb:
Only impatient, let him do his best,
At ignorance and carelessness and sin--
An indignation which is promptly curbed: 235
As when in certain travel I have feigned
To be an ignoramus in our art
According to some preconceived design,
And happened to hear the land's practitioners
Steeped in conceit sublimed by ignorance, 240
Prattle fantastically on disease,
Its cause and cure--and I must hold my peace!

Thou wilt object--Why have I not ere this
Sought out the sage himself, the Nazarene
Who wrought this cure, inquiring at the source, 245
Conferring with the frankness that befits?
Alas! it grieveth me, the learned leech
Perished in a tumult many years ago,
Accused,--our learning's fate,--of wizardry,
Rebellion, to the setting up a rule 250
And creed prodigious as described to me.
His death, which happened when the earthquake fell
(Prefiguring, as soon appeared, the loss
To occult learning in our lord the sage
Who lived there in the pyramid alone) 255
Was wrought by the mad people--that's their wont!
On vain recourse, as I conjecture it,
To his tried virtue, for miraculous help--
How could he stop the earthquake? That's their way!
The other imputations must be lies 260
But take one, though I loathe to give it thee,
In mere respect for any good man's fame.
(And after all, our patient Lazarus
Is stark mad; should we count on what he says?
Perhaps not: though in writing to a leech 265
'T is well to keep back nothing of a case.)
This man so cured regards the curer, then,
As--God forgive me! who but God himself,
Creator and sustainer of the world,
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile! 270
--'Sayeth that such an one was born and lived,
Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house,
Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was...what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact, 275
In hearing of this very Lazarus
Who saith--but why all this of what he saith?
Why write of trivial matters, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark?
I noticed on the margin of a pool 280
Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,
Which, now that I review it, needs must seem
Unduly dwelt on, prolixly set forth! 285
Nor I myself discern in what is writ
Good cause for the peculiar interest
And awe indeed this man has touched me with.
Perhaps the journey's end, the weariness
Had wrought upon me first. I met him thus: 290
I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
A moon make like a face with certain spots
Multiform, manifold and menacing:
Then a wind rose behind me. So we met 295
In this old sleepy town at unware,
The man and I. I send thee what is writ.
Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
To this ambiguous Syrian--he may lose,
Or steal, or give it thee with equal good. 300
Jerusalem's repose shall make amends
For time this letter wastes, thy time and mine;
Till when, once more thy pardon and farewell!

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too-- 305
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
Thou hast no power nor may'st conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love, 310
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

FOOTNOTES

¹"Hanoverians," The New Caxton Encyclopedia, 1977 ed., IX, 2912.

²George Ford, "The Victorian Age," in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M.H. Abrams, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1968), II, p. 730.

³Ibid., p. 727.

⁴Ibid., p. 728.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lawrence Lerner, "Victorian Masters: Treatment of Browning and Tennyson," Encounter, July 1974, p. 63.

⁸Ibid.

⁹G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1903), p. 188.

¹⁰J. Hillis Miller, "Robert Browning," in his The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 124.

¹¹Robert Browning, Selections from the Poetical Works of Robert Browning (London, 1872; rpt. Chicago: Belford, Clark, and Co., 1900), p. 35.

¹²William Lyon Phelps, Browning: How To Know Him (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1915), p. 6.

¹³Betty Miller, Robert Browning: A Portrait (London: John Murray Ltd., 1952), p. 22.

¹⁴Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, ed., Browning: The Critical Heritage, The Critical Heritage Series, Vol. 2 (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 4.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 6.

- 17 Lerner, p. 60.
- 18 Phelps, pp. 169-170.
- 19 J. Hillis Miller, p. 123.
- 20 Ibid., p. 88.
- 21 Ibid., p. 120.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 199, 123.
- 23 Phelps, p. 171.
- 24 J. Hillis Miller, p. 127.
- 25 Litzinger and Smalley, pp. 13-16.
- 26 Ibid., p. 16.
- 27 Rev. of Men and Women, by Robert Browning, in Browning: The Critical Heritage, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, Critical Heritage Series, Vol. 2, No. 101 (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 189.
- 28 Betty Miller, p. 6.
- 29 Ibid., p. 15.
- 30 Ibid., p. 30.
- 31 Ibid., p. 9.
- 32 Kingsbury Badger, "'See the Christ Stand!': Browning's Religion," in Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Philip Drew (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966), pp. 72-73.
- 33 Ibid., p. 73.
- 34 Ibid., p. 78.
- 35 Ibid., p. 75.
- 36 Phelps, p. 39.
- 37 Ibid., p. 51.
- 38 Ibid., p. 61.
- 39 Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁰All quoted material and line references up to and including footnote 41 refer to the poem itself as quoted in full in Chapter 4.

⁴¹See footnote 40.

⁴²Badger, p. 80.

⁴³Betty Miller, p. 8.

⁴⁴Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, The Arabs: People and Power (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1978), p. 32.

⁴⁵David Masson, rev. of Men and Women, by Robert Browning, in Browning: The Critical Heritage, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, Critical Heritage Series, Vol 2, No. 96 (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 180.

⁴⁶Same guidelines as footnotes 40 and 41.

⁴⁷Anton Vögtle, "The Miracles of Jesus against their Contemporary Background," in Jesus in His Time, ed. Hans Jürgen Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 98.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁹Masson, pp. 179-180.

⁵⁰The Arabs, p. 85.

⁵¹Badger, p. 73.

⁵²Ibid., p. 76.

⁵³Ford, p. 734.

⁵⁴Badger, p. 76.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁶Ford., p. 734.

⁵⁷Badger, p. 81.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 83.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 78.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 87.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 79.

⁶²Ibid., p. 80.

⁶³See footnote 61. Did he not say "it is true for them"?

⁶⁴Badger, p. 90.

⁶⁵Same guidelines as footnotes 40 and 41.

⁶⁶William Gass, Quote, Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 20, No. 1 (1978), 4.

⁶⁷The Poetry of Robert Browning, ed. Jacob Korg (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 172-182.

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